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Monitor and Control in China

By Rachel Rofkahr

The use of security cameras such as these, looking out over Tiananmen Square in Beijing, is on the rise in China. Critics say the government is using them to discourage dissidents.

10/28/2020 Washington D.C. (International Christian Concern) – Congregants at the Muyang Church in Hubei were alarmed when Chinese authorities suddenly showed up at their church to install facial recognition and fingerprint scanners in the building. Suddenly, attending Sunday morning church service became much riskier for congregants.

Reports circulated that the fingerprints and scans were being used to not only monitor and track individuals attending worship services, but also their extended families. The regular scans were used to determine who was consistently attending services so that the CCP could keep tabs on their families and even pressure them to stop attending if they became too much of a threat.

Religious Profiling

In China, it is estimated that there are approximately 626 million facial recognition cameras in the country – one camera for every two people. The Chinese government has installed these cameras to spy on religious activity and prevent non-sanctioned religious worship. In China's northwest province of Xinjiang, for example, the CCP tracks ethnic Uyghur Muslims by marking and tracking men with beards, which is common among Uyghur men.

Benedict Rogers, a human rights activist and Hong Kong expert, shared in an interview with Jeff King that using cash is almost impossible. "Credit cards are not widely used. Instead, facial recognition technology on your phone allows you to buy something." The CCP has been using that same technology to racially and religiously profile individuals and use that information to control and extort them.

Monitoring the Church

Christians in China feel constantly watched by their "Big Brother" government. Liao Qiang and his family, who were members of Early Rain Covenant Church, experienced this. The government stationed a 24/7 surveillance team outside of their residence after the church raid.

Each member of Liao's family had a designated team to follow them around wherever they went. If they were out of sight, the police used GPS tracking on their cell phones to monitor them. The police would follow them and appear suddenly to instill fear. At one point, seven people were tasked with following one family member. Twenty people watched them inside their own home. They were everywhere.

The country has long been monitoring state-run churches with cameras placed all around the premises and inside. This initiative, known as the Sharp Eyes Project, intended to achieve "blind-spot free monitoring" by 2020, including rural regions of the country.

Through the use of facial recognition, fingerprint scanners, and other developing technology, China can track every movement of the Church and punish Christians for following their religious beliefs.

Social Credit System

When integrated with China's Social Credit system, this new surveillance system has become even more dangerous. China's social credit system is used to penalize religious worship by limiting access to travel, jobs, or even a place to live.

Through this system, China can track its citizens' movements and economic transactions and use it to profile and assess citizen activity. China integrates a points system alongside the surveillance and uses these points to control and manipulate citizens into obedience. Maintaining good standing in the points system is vital as it affects all aspects of one's life. For instance, if you want to travel across the country to see your family, whether you travel by plane or by bus depends on your social credit score. It also allows you to stay employed in a good job.

Surveillance of Christians and churches is used by the CCP to control and punish church leaders under the auspice of fake charges, such as "subversion of the state." The CCP will also demolish churches that will not be controlled by the CCP, because, according to them, unregistered churches are extremists.

Paranoia in China

Paranoia is the driving force behind the CCP's new surveillance and social credit system. In 2018, President Xi made it illegal to share religious material or evangelize in a non-state-approved church. He has steadily been shutting down any space for dissent, religion, or civil society.

The CCP has built an intricate and inescapable surveillance system like something out of George Orwell's famous novel, 1984. It allows the communist party to control every aspect of the lives of its citizens to ensure its own survival. Religion is a threat to the CCP, and government leaders will do everything in their power to stop its spread.

The Noose of Communism

Religious freedom is an essential human right. If religious freedom declines, the rest of our fundamental freedoms decline. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback told ICC, "Communism cannot survive with religious freedom."

Religious freedom is foundational to democracy because it involves the freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and freedom of the press. Understanding that central fact helps to explain why the CCP is constantly attempting to strangle the Church.